Pope Leo's trip to Spain: Backgı Sagrada Familia, migrant advoc changing Catholic landsca

by Gerard O'Connell June 4, 2026

A woman in Madrid takes a picture of a poster of Pope Leo XIV May 28, 2026, ahead of the pontiff's June 6- News photo/Kacper Pempel, Reuters.

Pope Leo XIV's visit to Spain and the Canary Islands from June 6-12 will take the pontiff to a country with a long Catholic tradition but a changing and complex reality around religious identity and practice.

A member state of the European Union, Spain has a population of almost 50 million people, some 45 million of whom have been

baptized. Today, however, only 56.1 percent of the population identifies as Catholic, according to a May 2026 survey by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociologicas, compared to 73.5 percent when Pope Benedict XVI came here in 2011, according to a report in Religion Digital on the eve of the visit.

The 2026 survey further reports that only 18.5 percent of those who identify as Catholic say they are practicing. Another 11.8 percent of the population claim to be agnostic and 12.4 percent profess to be indifferent, while 14.7 declare themselves to be atheist.

On this, his fourth foreign trip, the American-born missionary pope will visit the capital city of Madrid as well as Barcelona and the Canary Islands. Everywhere he goes, in accordance with the motto for his visit, "Alzada La Mirada" (Jn 4.35), he will encourage Spaniards to "Look up" or "Look around you."

Apart from seeking to revitalize and confirm the Catholic community in the faith, among the high points of his visit in Madrid include his address to the Cortes Generales, the country's bicameral legislature, and the celebration of Mass in the Plaza de Cibeles and Eucharistic procession at which an estimated one million people will participate. The highlight of his visit to Barcelona will be the celebration of Mass and the inauguration of the Tower of Jesus Christ in the Basilica of La Sagrada Familia on the centenary day of the death of Antoni Gaudí, "God's architect." His visit to the Canary Islands, on the other hand, will throw the spotlight on the migrant crisis there and in the rest of Europe.

Leo will be the third pope to visit Spain, a land that has already given the Catholic Church two popes: Callixtus III (1455-58) and his nephew, Alexander VI (1492-1503). Both men came from the Kingdom of Aragon in what is modern-day Valencia. A third pope, Damasus I (366-84), was born in Rome to a family of Spanish descent. In addition to these, the anti-pope Benedict XIII (known

as "Papa Luna") also came from the Aragon region and was one of three men who laid claim to the papacy during the Great Western Schism from 1378 to 1417.

John Paul II was the first modern pope to visit Spain, a country that is slightly larger than California; he went there five times, starting in 1982 with a ten-day visit to 18 cities, followed by four shorter visits in 1894, 1989, 1993 and 2003. His successor, Benedict XVI, visited three times; first in 2006, then in 2010 when he consecrated the Basilica of La Sagrada Familia and for the last time in 2011 for World Youth Day, attended by some 1.5 million young people from 193 nations.

As prior general of the Augustinian order from 2001 to 2013, Robert Francis Prevost went to Spain a number of times to visit the several hundred Augustinians living and ministering there. He speaks Spanish fluently and knows much about the culture and the history of this country and the role its Catholic monarchs have played in the history of the church, including especially Latin America. He knows too that Spanish saints have greatly influenced the Catholic Church and evangelization worldwide, including Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier; and, in modern times, Josemaria Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei.

Despite repeated invitations, Pope Francis never visited Spain, or indeed any of the other major European countries; he opted instead to visit those more on the peripheries of the church and world.

Now Pope Leo comes to a country where the church has a network of 22,922 parishes, served by 18,113 priests (of whom 5,652 are from religious orders), 601 deacons, 32,966 professed women religious, 1,588 members of secular institutes and 80,637 catechists. The church in Spain also has 595 minor seminarians and 1,343 major seminarians. Spanish sources claim they have

been seeing a religious revival among young people, particularly in Madrid, in recent years.

Spain has changed much since Benedict XVI's last visit in 2011, as Cardinal José Cobo Cano, the archbishop of Madrid, told **America** in an interview to be published tomorrow. "The church that Pope Leo is going to encounter is a different church from the one Benedict found," he said. "It is a different generation. We have been through Covid. We have also been through a democratic evolution. We have also been through a sense of despondency that we can see growing. So society is changing and so is the church. I think what remains—and in Spain this is genuinely true— is enthusiasm for the pope. That runs a little in our culture.... I think he will encounter the same enthusiasm that greeted Benedict."

As if to confirm that view, the Spanish government—which has in recent years reached several accords with the Vatican—approved a royal decree on May 26 that hailed the visit as "an exceptional event and of special public interest." In this context, an unprecedented security operation, involving some 24,000 security personnel, will ensure the protection of the pope and those participating in the papal events during the six-day trip. Spain is already under a relatively high Level 4 anti-terrorist alert, according to EFE, the main Spanish news agency.

Pope Leo will depart from Rome on Saturday morning, June 6, accompanied by Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin and Cardinal Ángel Fernández Artime, S.D.B., prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Archbishops Paolo Rudelli (chief of staff), Paul Gallagher (the Vatican's foreign minister) and Filippo Iannone, O. Carm., (prefect for the Dicastery for Bishops) will also travel with him, as will his private secretaries, doctor, personal security detail and some 70 journalists, including **America**'s senior Vatican correspondent.

Leo will be welcomed at Madrid's international airport by King Felipe VI and Queen Letizia of Spain. From there, he will travel to the 17th-century Royal Palace in Madrid for a state welcome. After a private conversation with the Spanish monarchs at the palace, he will address an audience composed of state authorities,

representatives of civil society and the diplomatic corps. It will be the first of 22 talks (including homilies) that he will give; all except one will be in Spanish.

That evening, he will visit the staff and representatives of the "Cedia 24 horas social project," a center for homeless people in Madrid's Lucero district, before joining a prayer vigil with young people in the Plaza de Lima.

On Sunday morning, he will celebrate Mass at the Plaza de Cibeles for a vast crowd, and then participate in a Corpus Christi procession through the city streets, symbolizing a church that goes out to the people. That afternoon, he will greet members of the Augustinian order at the nunciature (Vatican embassy) where he will also stay during his sojourn in the city. In the evening, he will go to Movistar Arena to meet those involved in "building networks with the world of culture, art, economy and sport." Afterward, he will have dinner at the residence of Cardinal Cobo Cano.

On Monday morning, June 8, he will receive Pedro Sánchez, Spain's prime minister since 2018, at the nunciature. The Spanish leader, who declares himself to be atheist, visited Leo in the Vatican on May 26. According to the Vatican, they discussed global conflicts, migration, international law and strengthening Vatican-Spain relations. It was their first face-to-face meeting. Afterward, the prime minister described the pontiff as a "moral compass" in the fight against injustice and "an inspiration in a world in great need of it."

Religion Digital said the pope's visit to Spain comes at a time when the Spanish government and the Holy See "have demonstrated their alignment on various issues thanks to a fluid dialogue—though not without differences—that has led to five key agreements during Pedro Sánchez's eight years as prime minister." It cited their "alignment on issues such as migration, the promotion of peace, the fight against inequality, and how to

address the challenges posed by artificial intelligence."

Nevertheless, it said, they have differences regarding the question of education and disagree on issues like abortion and euthanasia.

Eva Fernández, the Vatican correspondent for COPE, a Spanish Catholic radio network, told **America**: "In recent years, the government and the Holy See have fostered a period of understanding that has resulted in several significant agreements on sensitive issues. Among these, the establishment of a compensation system for victims of sexual abuse within the church stands out; this mechanism aims to provide redress and strengthen prevention protocols, and has marked one of the most significant milestones in the dialogue between the two sides."

Another key area of cooperation, she said, is immigration, "where both sides have strengthened their alignment in addressing migration flows and protecting human rights, in line with the Vatican's social priorities. This framework of understanding is part of a broader context of institutional rapprochement on social and ethical issues, which the article [in Religion Digital] reported on the eve of Pope Leo XIV's upcoming visit to Spain."

After his meeting with the Spanish prime minister, the pope will drive to Palacio de las Cortes, where he will make history by becoming the first pope to address a plenary session of the Cortes Generales. Podemos, the far-left anti-austerity party, said it will boycott the session because it objects to a pope being received by the parliament of a secular state. Sources expect Leo to address not only issues relating to Spain but also the wider situation in Europe and perhaps internationally.

From there, he will travel six miles by car to the headquarters of the Bishops' Conference of Spain, where he will address the country's 130 bishops and have lunch with them at the nunciature. That afternoon, he will lead a prayer service at Madrid's Almudena

Cathedral before going for an hourlong meeting with the diocesan community at Santiago Bernabéu Stadium, home to the Real Madrid soccer team.

On Tuesday morning, June 9, Pope Leo will fly to Barcelona, a port city with a population of 1.7 million people whose origins date back to two centuries before Christ. He will then drive to the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, whose origins date back to the sixth century C.E.; after being welcomed by the cardinal archbishop of Barcelona, Juan José Omella, he will lead the midday prayer and then have lunch at the archbishop's residence, where he will reside during his stay here.

That afternoon, he will meet the president of Generalitat de Catalunya, the institution by which Catalonia is self-governed as an autonomous community of Spain. In the evening, the pope will participate in a prayer vigil and dialogue with 40,000 young people at the Lluís Companys Olympic Stadium.

The next morning, Leo will briefly visit the "Brians 1 Penitentiary" and greet 80 of the inmates there before going to the monastery of Monserrat. Founded in 1025 and rebuilt in the 19th and 20th century, the monastery is home to the famous statue of Our Lady of Monserrat, whom Pope Leo XIII declared Patroness of Catalonia. There, Leo XIV will recite the rosary with the Benedictine monks who live in the monastery and about 1,000 children gathered there for the occasion.

In the afternoon, he will meet with diocesan charity and welfare organizations in the 17th-century Church of Sant Agustí Nou, known as "the cathedral of the poor." That evening, in a high point of his visit to Spain, Pope Leo will celebrate Mass in the Basilica of La Sagrada Familia. He will also inaugurate the Tower of Jesus Christ, the last of the six central towers to be added to this magnificent, inspiring edifice designed by Antoni Gaudí. It is the tallest church in the world at 566 feet. Some 8,000 worshipers will

attend this event, but only 4,000 of them will be inside the basilica. The pope will also pray at the tomb of Gaudí, the centenary of whose death falls on this day.

On Thursday, June 11, Pope Leo will leave Barcelona and travel by plane to the Canary Islands, a Spanish archipelago off the coast of northwestern Africa, where thousands of migrants from Africa and Latin America first arrive after often-perilous journeys as they strive to reach the European mainland. According to Caritas, migrants count for 24 percent of the 2.27 million people living on these islands, and 25.5 percent of the total population live in structural poverty and social exclusion.

Pope Francis had planned to come to the Canary Islands to highlight the plight of migrants, just as he did at Lampedusa and Lesbos in the Mediterranean, but health problems prevented him from doing so.

Pope Leo will arrive at Las Palmas airport in Gran Canaria, one of the archipelago's seven main islands. There, at the small port of Arguineguín, he will meet with members of the organizations working with migrants and with 1,000 migrants from Latin America and Africa. Leo is expected to speak forcefully here, appealing to Europe to welcome and integrate migrants who had to leave their homes because of war, poverty or climate change. He will also lay a wreath in memory of the migrants who lost their lives on the Atlantic route to the islands.

Afterward, he will drive to the Cathedral of St. Anne for a meeting with some 50 Spanish bishops as well as the island's priests, deacons and pastoral workers. That evening, he will celebrate Mass for more than 50,000 people in Gran Canaria Stadium.

On Friday, June 12, the last day of his journey, Leo will fly from Gran Canaria to Tenerife, the largest of the Canary Islands. There, he will meet some 600 migrants housed at the "Las Raíces center," a former military barracks now used to house migrants (of whom there were once 4,000 housed at the location), and speak—but in French, not Spanish, as most of the migrants are from Francophone Africa.

Afterward in the Plaza del Cristo, he will meet with organizations working for the integration of migrants. He will conclude his visit by celebrating Mass at the port of Santa Cruz of Tenerife, and bid farewell to the people before boarding the plane for Rome. He is expected to hold a press conference on the flight home.